

HOW TO SELECT A MYSTERY SHOPPING COMPANY

Which Mystery Shopping Company You Choose Depends On What You Want To Do With The Shopping Reports

By Robert Welcher

What to Look for in a Mystery Shopping Service

Today's mystery shopping services function at various levels. Some have shoppers fill-in a simple checklist that gives the operator a snapshot of the operation. More sophisticated shopping services provide detailed, customized reports that are part of an overall plan to improve customer service, increase sales and to build customer loyalty.

A major distinction in mystery shopping companies is the level of training provided to the shoppers. Mystery shopping is mostly performed by part-time shoppers who have little to no previous experience in this area. A mystery shopping company that invests a minimal amount of time and resources into training will therefore have to use a simple style of reports – and will be affected by the shopper's bias. A more detailed shopping report will require more training and will generate less subjective results.



Mystery shopping is, in reality, an observational survey. Because of this, mystery shopping is subject to bias. There are many mystery shopping services that are poorly designed due to the fact that the reports are not created to control the shopper's subjectivity – i.e. the accuracy of the reporting can be affected by the shopper's bias. Simple "yes" / "no", open ended, fill-in-the-blank questions result in low quality reports that are too subjective. A good example of an ineffective open-ended question would be, "Was the server friendly?" What might be "friendly" to one person, might not be considered friendly by another person.

A shopping report that is properly designed will control shopper's subjectivity, limiting personal bias or interpretation. A higher level shopping report, termed a pre-defined response report, would control the subjectivity by providing pre-defined answers. For friendliness, there would be established criteria that would guide the shopper to an appropriate response. Low-level shopping reports are not all bad, but it is important to

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recognize their short-comings and not to use them as a training tool for your service staff – i.e. as a means of modifying behavior and improving performance.

Choosing a Mystery Shopping Company

When choosing a mystery shopping company, it is important that you first define your goals for using mystery shopping. Do you just want an occasional snapshot of your restaurant operations for your own information? Or, do you want to take mystery shopping to the next level and use the reports as an integral part of your training program and share the reports with the service associates and use the reports as a basis for an incentive reward program to motivate and improve your service staffs' performance?

Low-level shopping reports lack the necessary detail to be used as a training tool and are too unreliable to use as a basis for an incentive reward program.

When shopping for a mystery shopping company, look for references and endorsements. Check with your local restaurant association for referrals or check with other restaurant owners to see what company they use and if they are satisfied with the company's performance.

Several important questions to ask a potential mystery shopping company:

- How do they recruit their mystery shoppers?
- What training do they provide their shoppers?
- What type of report do you have? (yes / no, fill-in the blank, pre-defined responses)
- What is the term of the mystery shopping agreement?
- What is the price per shop?
- Are there any set-up charges?
- What is the turnaround time for report delivery?
- What is the reimbursable shopper expense and tip limit?
- How are reports delivered – USPS Mail, website, downloads, email, fax?

As with most things in life, the bottom line is that “you get what you pay for.” There are many mystery shopping companies to choose from that are reasonably priced and provide good reporting. What you decide to pay and the results provided at that cost depends on your goals and objectives. ♦

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